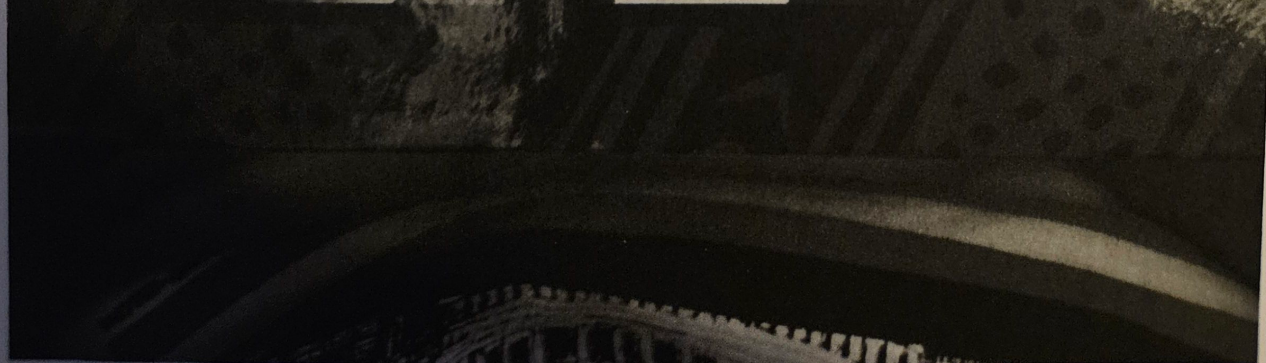




Black Heroes

JESSIE CARNEY SMITH

Foreword by Nikki Giovanni



Black Heroes

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MELVIN VAN PEEBLES

1932–

Film director, writer, actor, composer, stock market trader

Melvin Van Peebles broke barriers and stereotypes with his films, books, and music, creating works with a radical, political, or, as he was quoted in Variety, "sociological edge," raising awareness of racial prejudice and societal problems among all groups. He is considered a Renaissance man and contemporary jack-of-all-trades who is never at a loss when faced with the need to learn or to create another direction. His film Sweetback earned him recognition as the "godfather of independent black film." He is also called "the grandfather of rap" for his musical compositions with talk-singing.

Melvin Van Peebles was born on August 21, 1932, in Chicago to Marion Van Peebles and Edwina Griffin. Marion Van Peebles was a hard worker from Georgia who taught himself to read. Becoming a small businessman in Chicago, he was able to send son Melvin away to college after he graduated from Thornton Township High School in 1949. Van Peebles graduated with a degree in literature from Ohio Wesleyan in Delaware, Ohio. A partial scholarship with the ROTC led, thirteen days after graduation, to three and a half years as an officer in the air force. The young lieutenant returned to civilian life, discovering his expertise as radar operator, bombardier, and navigator on a jet bomber powerless in gaining work with civilian airlines who still refused to hire minorities. Van Peebles met his wife Maria in California and moved to Mexico. Their first son, Mario, was born in 1957. Growing tired after a few months of the confinement of painting portraits for a living, the family returned to settle in San Francisco where Van Peebles found a new challenge while driving cable cars. Heeding the inquiries of patrons eager to learn more about the cable cars, he wrote *The Big Heart*, a sentimental pictorial book on cable cars, in 1957. In that same year, Van Peebles also decided to expand in another direction, films. His first feature movie turned into three eleven-minute shorts, a borrow-the-camera, listen-to-the-friend, learn-on-the-way project. Hollywood rejected the films, while Van Peebles rejected their offer of an elevator or dancing job.

Having been a celestial navigator and having studied radar, physics, and astronomy in the service, Van Peebles decided to expand those interests by working toward a Ph.D. in astronomy in Amsterdam. He moved his family by way of a ship from New York to Amsterdam. In Amsterdam, he studied with the Dutch National Theatre and toured as an actor in Brendan Behan's play *The Hostage*. A letter from Cinémathèque, telling him he should be making films and inviting him to Paris, interrupted his new life. He accepted the invitation and the red

carpet treatment but was not offered a job, so once again he taught himself a new language to continue his writing.

The family had increased to include a daughter, Megan, before the Van Peebles moved to Amsterdam. Their second son, Melvin, was born in Paris. Van Peebles wrote in French and English, directed films, and gained awards that brought him recognition in the United States and a return to this country.

Not speaking French initially, nor having any friends in Paris, Van Peebles did whatever he could in Paris to earn a living. His inquisitiveness gained him work as a crime reporter, and finally he became editor of *Fara Kiri*, France's version of *Mad* magazine. Having learned that a French writer could have a film director's card, he wrote five novels in French. His first book, *Un Ours pour le F.B.I.* (1964), *A Bear for the F.B.I.* (translated in 1968), tells about racial problems in the life of a middle-class American black. Seeking American writers, an American literary agent found Van Peebles and asked him to write a black book with rage. In response, he wrote *Un American en enfer* (1965), *The True American* (1976), about George Abraham Carver, a black prisoner accidentally killed by falling rocks. In hell, Carver and other blacks are treated well, causing greater hell to the white residents there. The agent wouldn't publish it due to its subject matter; however, the book was finally published in the United States in 1976. He wrote a collection of short stories, *Le Chinois du XIV* (1966) and two short novels, *La Fete a Harlem* (1967) and *La Permission* (1967). Now qualified for a French director's card, Van Peebles received financial assistance from the French Ministry and a private citizen, which allowed him to make his first feature film, *La Permission* or *The Story of a Three-Day Pass*, a bittersweet story of a black soldier's harassment from his army buddies for his affair with a French woman, which eventually took him back to the United States.

Becomes film director Van Peebles brought *The Story of a Three-Day Pass* to the 1967 San Francisco Film Festival as the delegate of France. The film won Critic's Choice award for best film, finally opening the door in the United States for a black film director. Van Peebles was receiving wide press and was touted as a filmmaker with an edge. Based on the success of *The Story of a Three-Day Pass*, Columbia hired Van Peebles to direct and write the score for *Watermelon Man* (1970), a humorous tale of a bigoted white insurance agent who wakes one morning to find that he's black. Van Peebles became the second African American to direct a film for a major Hollywood studio. The film received mediocre reviews and made little money.

Preferring the freedom from studio control for making his own choices of material and messages, Van Peebles found his own financing for his next film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971, Yeah, Inc.). *Sweetback* paved the way for blaxploitation films with super stud-type heroes portraying action and violence against the establishment, allowing black urban audiences to fantasize about power and retribution. Van Peebles wrote the script and music, and produced, directed, and starred in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, which he made in three weeks with nonunion help. Because of its inflammatory content, the film received no publicity or airplay. To counter his lack of advertising, Van Peebles resorted to drastic measures, which eventually paid off. He passed out leaflets on street corners, promoting the film as "Rated X by an All-White Jury," and he dedicated it to "All the Brothers and Sisters who have had enough of The Man." Audiences advertised it by word of mouth, and their attendance placed the film on *Variety's* list of moneymakers. Zimmerman notes in *Newsweek*

that the "episode in the history of the black man, as Sweetback, dressed in drag, makes love to a black woman amid the chuckling applause of a predominantly white audience, is one of the most effective metaphors of black degradation ever filmed . . . one man, telling it like he sees it, his dream of liberation unadulterated by studio pressures or commercial considerations." The plot involves Sweetback, a pimp, who chooses to avenge the beating of a youth by two white policemen. He turns revolutionary, stomps the policemen unconscious, and runs, eventually, to his freedom in Mexico. It showed the audience a black who fought the Man and won. Eventually *Sweetback* took in \$10,000,000, becoming one of the highest-grossing independent films of its day.

After the success and controversy over *Sweetback*, Van Peebles went into an idle stage in filmmaking, but his attention and achievements went toward other areas such as music and the theater.

Brer Soul, Van Peebles's first album, uses minimalist music and monotone talk-singing to tell stories of black street life. On September 26, 1968, A&M released the album featuring metered musical monologues by DJ King Stitt, U Roy, and the Last Poets. In addition, Gil Scott-Heron came along to further develop what is referred to as rap. In *Billboard* Van Peebles explained the inspiration for the album:

When I was growing up in the streets of Chicago, a brer was a bro, a homeboy. The idea of doing a record employing the Brer Soul character arose back in 1967, when I returned to this country after living for several years in Holland and France. From abroad I knew the ferment of the civil rights movement, but I was struck when I got back here that almost none of the black popular or protest music mirrored the black experience *per se*.

The words are accompanied with funky jazz music. "In each song, I wanted to describe a part of life rarely seen," says Van Peebles. This desire to reproduce less visible parts of life, ghetto or street life, characterizes Van Peebles's focus in his creative efforts. He later directed and supervised the editing of *Funky Beat* (Artista Records), a music video by rap group Whodini, and composed the music and lyrics for *The Apple Stretching*. *Ghetto Gothic* (1995), his ninth album, portrays the now mellowed Van Peebles.

Three Broadway plays show Van Peebles's creativity, ingenuity, and expertise. He wrote the books, music, and lyrics and produced and directed *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death* (1971), which portrays street life, including frank and controversial discussions of lesbians and prostitution, and adapts the recordings from *Brer Soul*. Black celebrities increased attendance and the life of the play, which performed 325 times. *Don't Play Us Cheap* (1972) is a comedy about Harlem life, which he adapted for film in 1973, using his own company, Yeah, Inc. Together, the plays garnered eleven Tony nominations and a featured cover story in the *New York Times Magazine* Section. In 1973 Van Peebles toured the United States with his one-man show *Out There by Your Lonesome*. Van Peebles's third Broadway play, *Waltz of the Stork*, came out in 1982. He and son Mario both acted in the play. He also did off-Broadway plays *Champeen* (1979) and *Kickin' the Science* (1992).

Turning to television, Van Peebles wrote two scripts that were produced as films for NBC. *Just an Old Sweet Song* came out in 1976. This film was a mild-tempered family drama which countered Van Peebles's earlier film work. He then wrote the teleplay *Sophisticated Gents*, filmed in 1979, about nine boyhood friends that are members of a black athletic team, who reunite after twenty-five years to honor their old coach and to discuss how their lives

have been affected by their race. It was a topic not comfortably shown on the small tube, but Van Peebles was mild in inserting his anti-bourgeois ideas into this acclaimed drama.

To even counter his radical, folk-hero stance from the early 1970s, Van Peebles took a 180 degree turn in his career. In 1985, Van Peebles worked on the American Stock Exchange for three years, becoming their only African American trader. His experiences in option trading led to a series of weekly television commentaries in New York and to writing a how-to book, *Bold Money: A New Way to Play the Options Market* (1986), which tells about trading in easy-to-understand language. This was followed by *Bold Money: How to Get Rich in the Options Market* (1987).

Father and son work together During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Van Peebles made a return to film making with the help of his son, Mario Van Peebles, who is also a noted filmmaker and actor. Mario made his screen debut in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. The two worked together in a small film, *Identity Crisis* (1990), a comedy about a gay French couturier popping in and out of a black rapper's body. The elder Van Peebles produced and directed the film. In 1993 Van Peebles acted in the film *Posse*, an all-black Western written by Mario Van Peebles. Later they collaborated on *Panther*. Portraying the earlier rage of *Sweetback*, the film retold the political activities of the 1960s and early 1970s. Van Peebles wrote, produced, acted in, and coedited *Panther*, directed by son Mario. Quoted by Karen G. Bates in *Essence*, Van Peebles points out that "Nothing has changed! The gravity then is parallel with the gravity of our situation now." Mario Van Peebles adds:

One of the biggest things Dad brought to this film was the whole parallel between the then and now of drugs and alcohol being brought into the Black community. These same communities that were insisting on power to the people have been flooded with alcohol and drugs; they've been medicated. And the gangs have inherited the bravado of what might have been Panther life—but without the ideology to understand what their actions are.

Van Peebles recently appeared in the television remake of *Stephen King's The Shining* (1997) on ABC.

Van Peebles is a member of the Directors Guild of America and the French Directors Guild. He was awarded first prize from the Belgium Festival for *Don't Play Us Cheap*. Hofstra University awarded him an honorary doctorate in humane letters in December 1994.

Van Peebles is a rebel who follows his own rules and does what he pleases. His oft-repeated saying, "The golden rule is that he who has the gold makes the rules," has dictated Van Peebles's preference for financing his own work, allowing him to produce that which is most important, right, and necessary to him. As a film folk hero, he has led the way for independent African American cinema. "Grandfather of rap" and "godfather of modern Black Cinema," Van Peebles continues to write, publish, direct, act, and do the unexpected.—

CLAIRE A. TAFT